

# Gorbachev's Deal Is Not Unreasonable

Leaders of the Soviet Union have always understood the importance of the nationality question. On the very first day of its existence, the new Soviet government issued an official declaration. It was an affirmation of an absolute right of self-determination.

This conception of self-determination was promptly dropped in favor of a quite different doctrine reiterated by subsequent leaders that self-determination is "not an absolute" but must be subordinated to the class struggle and the interests of the Socialist camp.

As everyone understands, the self-determination question transcends the current showdown with Lithuania. All the nationalities are involved. According to the most recent census the Russians constitute 50.8 percent of the Soviet Union's total population. Many of the others have shown signs that—given a choice—they might well choose independence. Mikhail Gorbachev understands that in dealing with Lithuanians he is also dealing with Georgians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Uzbeks, Moldavians, Azerbaijanis, the Crimean Tartars, the Armenians and various other nationalities who were incorporated by force and who ever since have been the intermittent object of great cruelty and cultural genocide.

The issue of secession will not only determine the size and shape of the Soviet Union, it will also determine the kind of country it can become.

"One thing is clear. Genuine democratization and the preservation of empire, however disguised, are incompatible," state the authors of a forthcoming book, "Soviet Disunion."

I believe that Gorbachev desires to preserve the Soviet Union intact without using violence to do so. The history of the last four decades and the events of the past week indicate he probably cannot do so in the long run. But he can try.

The great show of force in Vilnius was clearly intended to send a message. But Gorbachev has said the message he wishes to send is not the same that Khrushchev sent to Budapest and Brezhnev sent to Prague. He is still insisting that secession is possible under the Soviet constitution.

This crisis goes to the heart of Gorbachev's reform program. The great achievement of Mikhail Gorbachev has been that he kept the troops in their barracks while the people of Eastern Europe reorganized their governments and resumed control of their lives. He accepted the popular decisions and let go the Eastern European empire. Obviously he feels differently about the internal empire.

He does not desire to see the country he rules diminished by half. He desires that all voluntarily remain a part of the Soviet Union. He has been willing to admit past "mistakes" and past repression. He has offered assurances of change.

"We cannot continue in the old way," his close

associate Alexander Yakovlev told the Latvians last winter and strongly implied that under the new plan the central government would control only foreign and defense policy and leave all else to the government of the constituent republics.

"We think it essential to ensure a democratic solution in line with the interests of both each individual ethnic group in the Soviet family and our Socialist society as a whole," Gorbachev declared.

But many of the nationality groups want no part of either the Soviet family or a Socialist society. They want out. Now the Soviet parliament has offered a five-year process leading to independence and including a referendum with a requirement for a two-thirds vote in favor of independence.

After a few days' show of Soviet force the government of Lithuania has said it is ready to negotiate, but not as part of the Soviet Union and not under the Soviet constitution. Gorbachev has said there will be no negotiations until Lithuania revokes its declaration of independence and accepts the process leading to secession provided by Soviet constitutional law.

What are we to think of their situation?

First, we must note that with his show of force Gorbachev has demonstrated once again that while he prefers to govern by consent he will use force where consent is lacking. The Eastern Europeans were simply lucky.

Second, he has demonstrated willingness to honor the Soviet constitution's provision for secession ignored by all his predecessors.

Third, while onerous, the proposed process for secession is not intrinsically unreasonable. What makes it seem so is the long years of brutal treatment and denial of identity that so many of the non-Russian people have endured. Two-thirds majorities are frequently required for constitutional revisions and amendments. So are waiting periods.

Fourth, we should be clear that the Soviet situation is not comparable to the U.S. Civil War (as some have suggested), because the Soviet Union's non-Russian peoples never petitioned to join the union and never decided to do so. It is also not analogous to Spain's situation with its Basque secessionists or to Puerto Rican *independistas*, because in those cases secessionists constitute a tiny minority of a large population that thinks otherwise.

Finally, we should remember that in politics hard questions are settled by power as well as by principle. The Soviets have the power. The deal the Soviet government has offered will probably turn out to be the only deal in town.

It is a way out. And it is a pathway available to all the "republics" of the U.S.S.R. With its passage, Gorbachev and the Soviet government have opened another Pandora's box.